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ABSTRACT

Despite the fact that only a small percentage of eligible senior citizens takes advantage of the opportunity, increasing numbers are enrolling in college and university classes. Not only do elderly college students have to overcome the long lapse of years since they were students, but age and maturity typically cause physical and psychological difficulties that serve to hamper academic adjustment. Visual and auditory problems are fairly common in persons 60 years or older. Age also affects the memory and learning as well as the ability to generate and organize data. Reading instructors can assist the elderly student to become aware of and to employ various organizational aids--glosses, italicized materials, and similar typographical aids. The older adult, just as the younger student, needs to be constantly reminded that learning is an active process that is best accomplished when the learner is attentive and has specific goals or objectives, and should be taught procedures for systematic review. Flexible reading, modes of comprehending, and vocabulary improvement also would be valuable. Above all there is an urgent need for reliable and valid data concerning the reading behavior of the elderly adult. (HOD)

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The Study and Reading Needs of the Elderly College Student

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The Study and Reading Needs of the Elderly College Student

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Despite the fact that only a small percentage of those eligible take advantage of the opportunity, an increasing number of senior citizens are enrolling in college and university classes (Bader, 1977-78; Marcus, 1978). Generally those who take advantage of the programs tend to have higher economic and educational status than the typical older adult (Covey, 1980; Kingston, 1981; March, Hooper, Baum, 1977). Although many of the elderly who enroll in regular college and university classes had attended college years ago, there usually is noticeable time lag that must be overcome. In the State of Georgia, for example, the mean age of those attending state institutions under free special provisions, was 67.2 years (Kingston, 1981b). For many of these individuals their prior experience as college students had taken place 40 or more years before.

Not only do elderly college students have the long lapse of years as students to overcome, but age and maturity typically cause physical and psychological difficulties which serve to hamper academic adjustment. Visual and auditory problems are fairly common in persons 60 years or older. The older person needs greater light when reading or engaging in many "close vision" tasks required of the student. Fozard and Popkin (1978) note

> The illumination required for satisfactory visual functioning increases with age primarily because of normal age changes in the amount of scattering of light in the ocular media, shrinking of the pupils, yellowing of the lens, and loss of accommodation. (p. 978)

Delivered at the American Reading Forum, Sarasota, Florida, December, 1981.

In the Georgia sample, 93% of those responding indicated they had no difficulty seeing the chalkboard and 94% indicated they had no difficulty in seeing audiovisual displays or demonstrations. A number of respondents, however, indicated that they chose seats in the front of the classroom to assure seeing what went on. Unfortunately, there is limited information concerning the effect of visual changes on the reading and study tasks faced by elderly college students. Goodrow (1975) argues that

> Poor vision was reported as the most serious constraint on the older American to reduce participation in adult learning programs. The barrier of declining visual acuity was found to be of primary concern with both male and female subjects. (p. 420)

Graney and Hayes (1976) also found that a number of elderly people felt that visual and auditory deprivation was a barrier to participation in educational programs. Considerable more research is needed in this area. In the Georgia study many more hearing difficulties were reported than visual difficulties. Although less than 17% of elderly respondents said they sometimes had difficulty hearing the professors' lectures. Nearly 30% indicated that at times they encountered problems in hearing classroom discussions.

A number of psychological and mental factors also may affect the senior citizen's adjustment to the college classroom. For many elderly persons, the reasons for enrolling in classes is significantly different from those of younger students. Many are interested in being intellectually challenged, others are satisfying long-desired aspirations. The college teacher can err badly by assuming the motives of the elderly student are identical to those of the teenager or young adult. Similarly, it would be a grevious mistake to assume all senior citizens have similar motivations.

Age apparently affects the memory and learning of normal older individuals. A common problem is slowness in the retrieval of information and the blocking on names of people and places. Fozard and Popkin (1978) stress

> Age differences are most pronounced in tasks that involve the memorization of, and the accuracy and efficiency in retrieval of, unconventional configurations of familiar verbal material. (p. 981)

Although these conclusions are based upon traditional paired-associate and free-recall studies they probably apply to other verbal learning tasks as well. Studies involving the cloze procedure and discourse analysis techniques might throw some light on the relationship of this phenomenon to reading behavior.

There is some evidence that the older student may have difficulties in inputting and organizing data. Whether this condition is due to lack of familiarity and experience with such tasks or to the effects of age is not certain. It does seem clear, however, that many elderly people have difficulty in separating important and relevant information from that which is unimportant and irrelevant. Research suggests that there should be a slower presentation rate and that new concepts should be presented only after the elderly have had time to assimilate those concepts previously taught. Typically, the elderly fail to use mediation and organizing abilities to the same degree as the younger adult. The instructor needs to structure information so as to help facilitate learning and memory. Advanced organizers might be helpful.

Many noncognitive factors may cause performance deficits in the older student. Anxiety due to the newness of the situation in which the old person finds himself, the meaningfulness of the task and the degree of concentration required affect learning. It seems readily apparent that

older people are willing to engage in tasks that they deem to be interesting and relevant, while refusing to interact with those they believe to be trivial, unimportant, or lacking in intrinsic value. Educators sometimes err in believing the older learner lacks the ability to learn when in actuality he or she has simply lost interest in the task or activity.

A few writers, aware of the impact of age on learning, have suggested methods of instruction designed to assure greater success (Bolton, 1978; Glynn & Muth, 1979; Woodruff & Walsh, 1975). Interestingly, the college-adult reading specialist who should have much to offer, has devoted little attention as yet to the reading-study problems of the older student. Many of the skills being taught the typical college student undoubtedly would be helpful to the adjustment problems of the older adult. Reading instructors, for example, could assist the elderly student to become aware of, and to employ, various organization aids--glosses, italicized materials, and similar typographical aids. Considerable attention could be devoted to assisting the older student to learn how to sequence and organize textual material. Instead of reading selections followed by short answer objective tests, the elderly should be given a large amount of practice in outlining and summarizing textual passages and orally presented materials. Assistance also might help the elderly to develop objectives and purposes for learning. Techniques such as the survey, question, read, recite, review procedure may help the elderly student in better organizing textual material. Continued attention needs to be devoted to helping the elderly to be attentive and goal-directed. The older adult, just as the younger student, needs to be constantly reminded that learning is an active process that is best accomplished when the learner is attentive and has specific goals or objectives he or she hopes to attain and concentrates on achieving them.

Again, the elder student needs to be taught procedures for systematic review.

Although the majority of college students today seem to prefer a textual reading mode that involves the underlining of selected passages with magic markers, this procedure probably is not as productive or helpful for the older adult. As note taking while reading requires the selection of important facts and principles, or generalizations as well as organization of concepts, ample practice in using these skills is desirable. Flexible reading, modes of comprehending, and vocabulary improvement also would be valuable. Above all there is an urgent need for reliable and valid data concerning the reading behavior of the 60, 70, and 80 year old adult.

It has been estimated that there will be 25 million Americans aged 65 years or older by 1985. Undoubtedly, the number who enroll in institutions of higher learning will increase. Although college administrators have showed concern for the adjustment problems of many other segments of society, little has been done to study systematically the problems of the older student. Those involved in college reading and developmental study programs will find working with senior citizen students a fertile field for service and research.

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